Constants in Warfare

The Relevance of Kasserine

By Martin Blumenson

That military history, if studied carefully, offers lessons to practitioners of the art of war has become a commonplace statement. It is so generally accepted that nothing more, apparently, needs to be said. The proposition stands.

What is far from evident is how the process of translating meaning from one age to another actually works. How does an individual go about the business of transferring insights gained from a battle that has already occurred to an engagement that is in the mind's eye, a confrontation that may erupt in the future?

Discovering useful information in the past that may apply to the present is tricky and anything but easy. The changing nature of war, the rapid pace of technology, the tumultuous development, international relations, as well as the constant transition of societies, all make the relevance of the past hard to grasp.

Furthermore, historians, who have the task of explaining what happened, usually bring prejudices of one sort or another to their work. They may admire and favor, sometimes quite unconsciously, an adversary or a leader.

The simple fact of standing in the present and looking back on events may prompt misperceptions of motivation, intent and simple mental set among the participants.

Before historians start their research, they know how the activity under investigation came to an end and what the outcome or result was. Therefore, to explain a defeat, they tend to magnify the obstacles. To make a victory understandable, they minimize the difficulties. This, of course, distorts the truth.

Finally, many details of an action are lost to later generations. Historians try to piece together a plausible account, and the extent of their success depends in large measure on their honesty and skill in interpreting fragmentary records.

Although all of this complicates the problem of learning from the past, history remains valid as guidance to those who must make decisions and act today and tomorrow.

Without a sense of what transpired earlier, the current soldier is at the mercy of his habits and emotions, his bias, his individual views and his personal experience, all of which may be too narrow or simply irrelevant to the situation at hand. A product of the present, he may lack the balance and foresight that come from acquaintance with a long historical vista.

A knowledge of past issues and events, if used with caution and a tight rein on jumping to conclusions, can be meaningful and helpful. Close reading and sound analysis stimulate ideas and broaden options.

Certain features transcend local limitations of date and geography and are worthy of consideration, study and thought. They are what may be called constants of warfare. They remain and persist, not only in the conflicts of antiquity but also in the struggles of modern times.

Gen. George S. Patton Jr. realized this when he was a cadet at West Point. Writing in his notebook to himself, he said:

In order *for* a man to become a great soldier ... it is necessary for him to be so thoroughly conversant with all sorts of military possibilities that whenever an occasion arises he has at hand without effort on his part a parallel. To attain this end ... it is necessary ... to read military history in its earliest and hence crudest form and to follow it down in natural sequence permitting his mind to grow with his subject until he can grasp without effort the most abstruce [sic] question of the science of war because he is already permeated [sic] with all its elements.

How does a reader actually proceed to find the eternal truths? Specifically, what can an engagement remote in time, technology, place and international setting tell military persons today?

The series of lethal meetings known as the battle of Kasserine Pass, for example, fought in Tunisia in February 1943, is a story rich in detail and drama. Briefly, German and Italian troops drove American and French forces from the Eastern Dorsal mountain range 50 miles across the Sbeitla plain to the Western Dorsal, where the Allies stopped the attack and prevented the Axis from expanding a tactical triumph into a strategic success.

What are the constants of that encounter?

The first constant for soldiers is and has ever been the terrain. The natural routes of advance, the naturally strong defensive positions, the location of the roads and bridges in central and southern Tunisia determined in large part how the action unfolded.

The two mountain ranges, the passes through them, the Sbeitla plain between them and the roadnet joining them shaped the flow of events. Close attention to a map of the battleground clearly shows how the conformation of the ground prompted the logic of both the attackers and defenders and imposed on them the choice of objectives.

Ruminating on other battlefields strengthens the perception of how natural and man-made features influence military behavior. Reflecting on potential battle sites may bring an appreciation of corridors requiring blockage, convenient areas for reserves, good jump-off points, vital objectives and the like.

The constants of logistics and communications are hardly less important. Sparse lines of communication, primitive road and rail networks, long distances, shortages of transportation and awful weather inhibited the Allied forces in Tunisia. For the Axis, the Mediterranean shipping vulnerable to Allied air bombardment was a handicap. These were facts of life for the adversaries, and no amount of generalship could overcome them.

Participants in future wars will find themselves similarly constrained by implacable and uncontrollably factors. Casting one's mind ahead to potential war environments will enhance intimations of reality.

It is perhaps a law of warfare that armies usually fight with inadequate supplies and defective signals. The tyranny of logistics denies units what they deem to be enough resources to engage in a battle or a campaign. Often, after the event, what seemed to be too much turned out to be insufficient.

To be aware of these conditions is to be forewarned. Being alert to these almost certain exigencies is, by itself, already a preparation.

The modernity of weapons and equipment is another constant, and the Americans and French in North Africa suffered. The American Stuart light tanks and Grant mediums-armed with 37-mm guns and, in the case of the latter, a low-velocity 75-were simply too weak against the German Mark IV Special with a high-velocity 75 and the Mark VI Tiger with its 88-mm main gun, or even against the more numerous Mark IIIs with long-barreled 50-mm guns.

Not until increasing numbers of the newer Shermans with 75-mm main guns were delivered could the

Americans begin to stand up to the Axis forces with some degree of equality.

The French were also underequipped and underarmed, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Their materiel had undergone no improvement since their defeat in the spring campaign of 1940. Lacking the up-to-date means of making war, they were unable to counter the superior weight and firepower of the German and Italian machines.

Soldiers in the field rarely dictate the nature and capabilities of their arms. What they have available depends on the national will, manufacturing establishment and the research-development procurement system. It is a sobering thought.

There are many kinds of intelligence, mechanical and human, and all have an important place in military operations. In Tunisia, just before the battle of Kasserine Pass opened, the intelligence officers of Allied Force Headquarters overrelied on or perhaps misinterpreted "Ultra" information which ran counter to what other intelligence sources were saying.

Patrols, air reconnaissance, prisoner of war interrogations and other measures indicated an Axis buildup in the south. Ultra radio intercepts pointed to the north, and the defensive precautions and dispositions toward that direction. When, the Germans and Italians struck in the south, they achieved surprise and overwhelmed the French and Americans.

The lesson is simple and fundamental, yet it is worth repeating. The unexpected in warfare is a constant hazard, and this applies to more than intelligence.

Leadership is always a constant in warfare-the competence of military professionals to act and react in situations fraught with emergency and stress and to make right decisions expeditiously. Whatever the state of the art, wherever warfare has taken place, leadership has mattered.

It is instructive to compare Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, who commanded the Axis forces in Tunisia, with Maj. Gen. Lloyd R. Fredendall, who commanded the U.S. II Corps. Rommel was sure in his strategic and tactical vision, a heroic figure to his troops and a man of great will.

Fredendall was vague and imprecise in his orders, usurped the functions of his subordinates, robbing them of initiative and responsibility, and without personal knowledge of the terrain, commanded from the rear by telephone, radio and liaison officers. The events exhausted him mentally and physically, dispirited him and rendered him incapable of action.

A function of leadership is the ability to understand and appreciate the time and space factors in a war. The speed of maneuver and the size of the battlefield have escalated in frightening fashion over the course of history.

Napoleon astonished his opponents by his lightning movements and by the scope and daring of his operational concepts. So did the Germans in *1939 in* Poland, in 1940 in Western Europe and again in 1943 in Tunisia.

Several American commanders at Kasserine were unable to adjust to the new conditions, what is sometimes called the response in the compression of threat reaction time. For the most part, they were older officers who had fought in World War I and whose views were still set in those terms of an earlier age.

Constantly astounded by how fast things were happening, they lacked the quickness to evaluate the situation, decide on a course of action and execute a proper response in the abbreviated time interval available to them. What seemed distant to them was, in fact, immediate. They were deficient, slow, ponderous and unable to cope, and their troops suffered defeat.

The acceleration has continued since World War II. Urgent crisis appears and requires the mental agility to reach instantaneous decision.

Mature officers who were brought up in an older tradition and are somewhat set in their ways are perhaps less capable of meeting this challenge than younger men. On the other hand, Gen. Patton one of the oldest of the senior American commanders in World War II, proved his ability to stay up with his times.

Kasserine Pass was a clash between two coalitions, Allied and Axis. Alliance warfare is always delicate. Partners are usually, if not always, unequal in strength.

Differences of language and customs, history and habit, culture and upbringing, doctrine and geography complicate and strain the relationship.

So do national interests, the desire for prominence and publicity and the wish to dominate. Coalition warfare, or interoperability as it is sometimes called, is circumscribed by a special kind of courtesy that inhibits unified, cohesive and quick action.

In World War II, the Allies had the better system. To a large extent, it was the result of prior experience in War I.

In March 1918, rather late in the war, Marshal Ferdinand Foch of France became the Supreme Allied Commander. Although his authority was limited and he functioned more by persuasion than by direction, he brought a unified outlook to the national forces on the Western Front.

Complementing this rudimentary command structure, the Supreme Military Council, a committee representing participants, sought to integrate the logistical aspects of a coordinated effort.

The Allies built on that experience shortly the Pearl Harbor attack and the entrance of the United States into World War II. The Anglo-Americans set up specific machinery to regulate the military partnership.

At the top, British Chiefs of Staff f and the American Joint Chiefs of Staff, the principal military advisors to the Prime Minister and the President, formed themselves into a single committee known as the Combined Chiefs of Staff. They were receptive to the wishes of their two political leaders, and they translated those wishes into military terms.

They laid out the strategy for the Prime Minister’s and President's approval. They allocated resources to the various theaters of operations, and they were the corporate bosses of the theater commanders in each case, a British or American Supreme Allied Commander who had far more authority than Marshal Foch ever had.

During "Torch," the North African invasion in November 1942, there was thought of Appointing French General Henri Giraud the Supreme or perhaps the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander. This was not feasible, for Giraud was, quite simply, outside the Combined Chiefs of Staff system. He was not bound to comply with the desires of the Prime Minister and the President.

Since the end of the war, the publication of memoirs and diaries has revealed much bad feeling and bickering on the part of some British and American officers toward each other. Gen. Mark Clark, in the privacy of his journal, recorded his disgust at being, he said, "caught in the British empire machine."

Gen. Patton, also in his diary, more "than once regarded Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower as being more British than American, and Field Marshals Sir Alan Brooke and Sir Bernard L. Montgomery constantly questioned Eisenhower's competence. Reading these accounts provokes wonder at how the Anglo-American alliance survived.

The fact is it flourished. It was the strongest coalition in the history of warfare. Despite grumbling on the part of disenchanted individuals, despite real and serious divergences of approach to strategy and policy, the partnership and the machinery that ran the military side functioned well and on every level.

The proof is the wonderful interoperability achieved at the Kasserine and Sbiba, passes, where French, British and American troops together halted the Axis forces, thus preventing a tactical triumph, that is, a battlefield victory, from becoming a strategic success, that is, a situation compelling the Allies to revise their political goals.

Had Rommel been able to gain Le Kef or Tebessa or to throw the Allies out of Tunisia-which he came close to doing he might well have changed the course of the war. In that case, the Allies would have had to renounce their political aims in North Africa and in the Mediterranean area, at least for some time.

The Axis lacked a formal machinery to mesh the efforts of Germany and Italy. Perhaps the basic reason was the absence of such experience among the Central Powers in World War I, when Germany and Austria tried to link their operations in *ad hoc* and intermittent fashion.

German and Italian coordination in North Africa was carried out by liaison officers and diplomats, No formal alliance structure existed to allocate resources.

The Fuehrer and the *Duce* met personally from time to time to discuss strategy and policy, but in these conferences, Hitler talked compulsively and interminably while Mussolini, who believed that he understood and spoke the German language so well that he dispensed with interpreters, listened. There was no meeting of the minds. The two dictators directed parallel wars.

There could be no real equality, no sharing of goals and methods. Italy depended on Germany for much of her war material, the corrupt Italian government often misused resources, and the Italian forces, except for a few elite and first-rate units, were generally inferior when compared to the Germans. Many Italian soldiers lacked good equipment and sufficient supplies, and they were less than enthusiastic to fight for a bankrupt system.

Yet Hitler admired Mussolini, whom he regarded as his political mentor, and he permitted Mussolini certain privileges. North Africa was an Italian theater of operations, with an Italian theater commander under the authority of *Comando Supremo* in Rome.

Both Rommel in southern Tunisia and Gen. Juergen von Arnim in the northern part of the country were subordinate to the Italian chain of command. Although the Italians deferred to the Germans, they insisted on German adherence to Italian authority, and in this, Hitler supported them.

Hitler's liaison officer in Italy was Gen. Enno von Rintelen, whose title was "German General at the Headquarters of the Italian Armed Forces." His function was to convey German views to the Italian high command.

Field Marshal Albert Kesselring was also in Rome, and as the senior German officer in Italy and North Africa, he exercised administrative control over the German troops in the area. In addition, he acted as a *de facto army* group commander in Tunisia and tried to coordinate the offensive actions of Rommel and Arnim.

Because Kesselring needed to have Com*ando Supremo's* acquiescence to his ideas and permission to carry them out, the Axis command at the top in North Africa was slow and hesitant.
As a result, Rommel was hampered. He was prevented from moving as rapidly as he wished. Perhaps this, in the end, denied him a strategic triumph.

A striking observation emerging from the Kasserine battle was the ability of the Axis forces, and particularly the Germans, to encircle allied troops. They pinned down by frontal attack the French defenders at the Faid pass and then surrounded them with units coming up from the Rebaou pass.

They marooned the American units on Djebels Lessouda and Ksaira by striking quickly to close off escape routes. Creating a pocket in which to trap and destroy the opponent seems to have been a natural mode of operations. This tendency was at work in the so-called "Hutier" tactics in 1918 and in the campaigns of 1939 and 1940.

The activity is implicit in *blitzkrieg.* It may derive from national doctrine or tradition, perhaps from outlook. The Russians also used this pattern of attack, aiming to cut up and to surround German troops-as, for example, Field Marshal Friedrich von Paulus's Sixth Army at Stalingrad.

The American method appears to be different. Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman's march through Georgia during the Civil War turned into a giant strategic pincer, but the intent seems to have emerged at the conclusion rather than at the inception of the movement.

In World War 1, Gen. John J. Pershing planned the battle of St.-Mihiel, designed to eliminate a salient, as an encirclement. The Germans escaped the trap. The MeuseArgonne offensive, the major American action, was a frontal attack.

Eisenhower's habit in Europe in the next war was much the same. His broad-front strategic envisaged attacks all along the line.

In France in the summer of 1944, the Germans at Mortain created a perfect opportunity for the Allies to surround and destroy them at Argentan and Falaise and again at the Seine River. Gen. Eisenhower, Field Marshal Montgomery and Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley were unable to pull off the maneuver, perhaps because of a lack of interoperability and inability to synchronize the Allied armies, perhaps because of a conflict of objectives or because to them, the operation was unorthodox doctrine.

When the Americans sought to trap Germans at Montelimar in the south of France shortly after the invasion, they failed. During the Battle of the Bulge, when the Allies stopped the Ardennes counteroffensive, presumably they could have cut off the salient at its base; they preferred to do other wise.

Part of the syndrome—if there indeed is to be a syndrome—is the nature of the objective. According to Gen. Karl von Clausewitz, the proper military objective is the enemy forces. When the Germans entered Paris in 1940 and the Russians seized Berlin in 1945, the war had been won on the battlefield. Hanoi raises an interesting speculation, but certainly Saigon proves the case.

The air-ground connection has been an important constant in the twentieth century and continues to be vital. At Kasserine, the Axis forces used air power far more efficiently and effectively than the Allies.

Part of the explanation was the German penchant for developing tactical power before the war, that is, forces to support the ground components, while the Allies were generally more interested in strategic bombing.

Part of the reason lies with better Axis arrangements for coordinating ground and air units in North Africa, perhaps a result of experience.

Much of the American problem with air was because of Fredendall. His supporting air commander established his headquarters near Fredendall’s and relations between the two staffs were good; but instead of giving guidance for the air support he wished, Fredendall allowed the air forces free rein. This

of course, was an abdication of command responsibility, a relapse into fuzziness or an unwillingness to do some hard thinking.

The relationship between the air and ground services is difficult because of a basic difference in outlook. Airmen and ground soldiers are raised in different environments, each with its own culture, set of beliefs and doctrine.

All the good will in the world, all the agreements signed, sealed and delivered in advance, and all the cooperation mutually promised before the event may well disintegrate at a time of real threat. The kind of air power delivered will depend on who is in overall control, an air force commander or a ground force officer.

An important constant in warfare is the readiness of the troops for combat, the state of their training and their familiarity with their weapons. The American soldiers were hardly prepared for Kasserine, in large part because of the degeneration of the American military establishment during the interwar years.

Rapid demobilization after World War I reduced the regular Army to 130,000 men on I January, 1920. In 1939, when World War II started in Europe, there were 210,000 regulars, but not a single division was prepared to fight.

The point is-the U.S. Army lacked the time to bring up and to equip a modern fighting force. Expanded and modernized overnight, the Army improvised and rushed its training programs. There was insufficient lead time to develop adequate weapons and equipment.

Kasserine blooded the Americans on the European side of the war, and it was a rude awakening to the rigors of combat. They made many mistakes, but they recovered quickly and impressed everyone with their willingness and ability to learn and to improve. Whether they will have enough time in the future to do so or whether they are ready now for the vicissitudes of warfare is, of course, a vital question.

These, then, are some of the lessons emerging from a study of the battle of Kasserine Pass, certain constants that have relevance in any environment and time frame. They may be helpful. More to the point, they may serve as a demonstration of how one goes about extracting and distilling meaning.

There is a personal interaction between the reader and the printed page. The student applies his particular intelligence and experience to the history he digests. As he seeks to enlarge his comprehension, he should be skeptical of the record presented and test his perceptions often.

He should remember that historians furnish the scenario and suggest reasons for the way parts of the past unfolded, but in the end, military professionals must go beyond the findings of historians and discover the proper linkages to the realities of the present and the potential realities in the future.

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